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## THE LINK BETWEEN THE POPULARITY OF CREMATION IN THE CZECH REPUBLIC AND RELIGIOUS FAITH

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**Abstract:** In the last one hundred years, Czech lands and Europe in general have witnessed a significant change in burial culture. In some countries, cremation has evolved into a dominant method of human burial, but Europe is highly differentiated in this respect despite its common Christian tradition. Does this change in burial culture reflect changes in religiosity? The largely secular Czechia ranks first in the practice of cremation not only in Europe but also worldwide. This paper discusses changes in burial methods in Europe, which are a reflection of socio-political processes that ultimately lead to more frequent cremation, and the role of cremation in religion is also discussed. One of the aims of the paper is to stimulate the geographer's/reader's interest in the subject of death and burial, which are issues that remain on the margins of world geography, and yet say so much about the cultural development of our society.

**Keywords:** cremation, burial culture, secularisation, socio-political development, necrogeography

Two key changes have occurred in the method of burial in Czechia as well as in Europe in general. The first change was a transition from incineration to burial in the ground (inhumation) in the Early Middle Ages, while the second change was a transition from burial in the ground to cremation, which is defined as incineration following the invention of the cremation furnace, in the 20<sup>th</sup> century. At first sight, both transitions may seem to be associated with a change in religion – the first transition with the advent of Christianity; the second with the secularisation of Czech society. Is religion really the cause of the change in burial culture? How can this hypothesis be tested? Newspaper headlines claim that Czechia is a “cremation superpower” and a “world champion” in cremation (Fričová 2007;

Nevyhoštěný 2012). Are these only the exaggerated slogans of journalists? To what extent is this statement based on facts? And to what extent is the popularity of cremation in Czechia a reflection of the continually decreasing percentage of persons who still espouse religious beliefs? In order to answer the above questions, I shall: (a) evaluate the historical circumstances behind the introduction of both changes in the burial method, (b) analyse the dependence of the current cremation rate in European countries using religiosity and other socioeconomic data, and (c) consider the increase in the cremation rate in Czechia in the modern period within the context of socio-political changes.

The paper addresses the subject of burial culture, which has only a marginal position in world geography, and has been completely ignored by Czech geographers up to the present time. In Czech society, and many other societies, the subject of death is a taboo; nevertheless, the manner of dealing with death constitutes a sign of cultural development and change across time and geographic space.

The human experience of death used to be very intimate. People died more often at home than today. At present, it is possible for a person to live till his or her death at an advanced age without actually seeing how other people die (Macková 2002). In the past, death was regarded as “tamed” and the dying person and his or her relatives were reconciled with it. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, a new attitude towards death began to emerge; death became untamed (forbidden). Death was considered hideous and was hidden from public view (Ariès 2000). Gradually, death was pushed out of society and turned into a taboo. Nevertheless, Gorer (1955), who compared the attitude of modern society towards death to societal attitudes towards sex in the Victorian period, states that our society is fascinated with violent death and he documents this statement using frequent displays of violent death in the media. In contrast, natural death is depicted only very rarely. There were practically no scientific studies dealing with death till the 1950s. By the end of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, death was again being discussed as a subject in scientific circles and among the general population of the world. In Czechia, the concept of the death taboo is still applicable as a result of the suppression of spirituality within the framework of Marxist ideology in effect until 1989 (Nešporová 2007). According to Pehalová (2011), one third of the Czech population never talks about death. She offers the following three explanations: (1) people’s fear of the knowledge that their lives will end, (2) the topic is ignored in families for many years, and (3) the topic is not interesting to the media. She also states that younger people avoid talking about death, because this issue is (relatively) distant for them; it is almost as if it does not apply to them.

The aim of the paper is not only to search for answers to the above given questions and the link between religion and the issue of cremation in Europe, but also to stimulate thinking about the subject matter (not only within the framework of geographic study). The aim is to provoke the reader to reflect on the given subject –

on how the choice of burial method reflects a culture on different levels – local, regional and national.

## Introduction

Death is an inseparable part of life, and yet (or because of this) this subject is being continually suppressed in modern society. The perception of death, the burial culture, and the visual appearance of a cemetery are phenomena that differ both across time and geographic space. The subject of death and burial rituals mainly represents the subject matter of sociology and anthropology, but also archaeology, the study of religion as well as other disciplines. The contributions of geography should complement the above mentioned approaches in the search for spatial connections and in the analysis of regional differentiation of the burial culture as one part of culture in general (Francaviglia 1971; Christopher 1995; Boulware 2008; Hupková 2010a) by applying new cultural geography concepts, which lay emphasis on the research of identity, sense of place and heritage, and especially on the reflection of death in the landscape – in geographic space, i.e. the so-called *deathscape*; the concept was introduced in Kong (1999). A *deathscape* is seen as a space, which has been touched by death and which has acquired different meanings. The landscape thus becomes a source of interpretation of these meanings, and the meanings can be revealed and evaluated through material manifestations and symbolism. The changes in functions and perception of the *deathscape* are made possible precisely due to the introduction of cremation, which has facilitated greater flexibility in the disposal of the remains of the deceased (Hupková 2013).

Although world geography does not address the subject matter of death at all, I believe that it is precisely the subject matter which is missing in the entire study of death and burial. The subject of cremation appears only in several geographical publications (Teather 1998, 1999; Kong 1999; Maddrell, Sidaway 2010; Katz 2012), and it is not a focal point of these publications, which in accordance with the current trend also concentrate more on different manifestations of burial in the landscape and in settlements (Hartig, Dunn 1998; Fink 2006; Boulware 2008; Burton 2010; Eriksson 2010; Selket 2010; Guojioe 2011).

The concept which characterises the subject matter of the geographical study of death is a burial culture. The main component of a burial culture is the method of burial, that is, the way the body of the deceased person is disposed of. In the European context, there is a difference between inhumation and cremation. The concept of the burial culture, however, includes within itself also all rituals and traditions associated with the burial and mourning (participation in a funeral ceremony, the form of ceremony and the role of religion in it, manifestations of

mourning in fashion, decoration of graves and care for them, etc.) and its manifestations in the landscape (this brings us back to the concept of a deathscape). The typology of the burial method can be constructed (in my view) according to two key aspects: (1) what the primary means of disposal of the body is (preservation of the body, incineration, mummification) and (2) where it is subsequently placed (burial in the ground, water or air; leaving the body to animals; storing, processing, dispersing and eating of ashes, etc.).

Different researchers emphasise different aspects of why a certain burial method is suitable or not suitable. I consider it essential to ask the question of why the burial method along with its associated rituals is important. The reasons behind the performance of a burial are practical – the disposal of remains. However, the purpose of a burial is also to (a) perform a ceremony and erect a monument (these are the instruments of mourning and remembering), (b) fulfil the wishes, ideas and life philosophy of the deceased person and (c) prepare for a further journey or the afterlife. I believe that societies (ethnicities, religious societies) which are characterised also by the last point – where burial is important as a preparation for the continuation of life's journey – will be more resistant to change and new trends in burial practices (Davis 1988). The remaining three reasons are more easily subject to fashion and to society-wide development.

James (1928) explains that burial in the ground and cremation stand in opposition to each other in cultures and religions in which there is a belief that the body and the soul are linked in one whole – very simply said the destruction of the body entails the destruction of the soul. The practice of burial rituals depends on ideas of the existence after death and these ideas are based on man's religious beliefs (Nešporová 2004).

## Brief history of changes in burial methods

Incineration burial used to be a primary burial method in many regions of the world. Documents on incineration show that it was introduced already in the Mesolithic (Denmark, Sweden) and the Neolithic (Svoboda 2002). Burial in the ground started to be practised from the 5<sup>th</sup> century after Christ. The symbolism of civil burials was identified with the burial of Jesus Christ, which was followed by Christ's resurrection. Incineration of the deceased was criminalised in the Christian Western world in 789 A.D. and remained forgotten for several centuries. The influence of Christianity on the change in burial practices in the Early Middle Ages now seems to have been decisive. However, upon a deeper and more detailed analysis of the transition from incineration to inhumation in Europe, the influence of Christianity on the change in the burial method no longer seem so unambiguous.

Around the 3<sup>rd</sup> century A.D. there occurred a significant and very rapid change in the burial customs of the Roman Empire. The burial method changed from incineration to skeletal burial. In the given period, Christianity was just starting to gain ground, and it can therefore be excluded as the cause of this change. Historical sources show that the main trend in the burial method was set by the burial of leading representatives of the Roman Empire. Other people then imitated the manner of their burial and rituals associated with it. The spread of inhumation was, therefore, more a matter of fashion. According to Štefan (2007, p. 2), “the newly-born Christian civilisation was given the skeletal burial as a christening gift.” The reason why the highest social classes began to practise inhumation is not known – inhumation may have been a sign of their status.

It seems that the role of Christianity as the initiator of the transition from incineration to inhumation was not pivotal. Nevertheless, its role in the diffusion of inhumation was not negligible. Inhumation was promoted by Christianity because it corresponded with the burial of Jesus Christ. The crossed arms of the deceased person and the position of the body and the grave from the east to the west are also a typical Christian symbol because the coming of Jesus Christ on the last day and the resurrection of the dead were expected from the east (Unger 2002). However, according to Štefan (2007), the Bible does not specifically include any prohibition of cremation and even early Christian sources do not regard incineration as an obstruction in the attainment of the eternal life.

Inhumation was first practised in the region now known as Czechia at the turn of the 9<sup>th</sup> century. Prior to this, incineration was characteristic of the Slavs, and Czechs are also Slavs. Due to the problematic nature of archaeological and anthropological research (impossibility of accurate dating of events, damage to sources of information over time), it is not clear if the advent of inhumation completely suppressed incineration or if both burial methods were at first used simultaneously and inhumation took over later. This leads to the reflection that it is very difficult to obtain accurate data in this type of research, and therefore if an enquiry is made into the relationship between the diffusion of inhumation and the advent of Christianity, the conclusions may become distorted as a result of a lack of knowledge of the exact chronology of these phenomena.

According to Štefan (2007), there are two distinct versions of the relationship between the diffusion of Christianity and the expansion of inhumation, and these are: (a) Christianity caused the expansion of inhumation, and (b) the acceptance of inhumation preceded the growth of Christianity – it was a matter of fashion and it was linked with state formation.

This continues to be a subject matter of debate – which of these two alternatives is true. Nevertheless, the following citation goes against the first alternative: “it is difficult to imagine that in areas with an emerging state [and] church apparatus



there could have been a mechanism which would have been able to systematically enforce the suppression of cremation against the will of the majority of the population” (Štefan 2007, p. 24). One significant and already mentioned factor is also that inhumation became popular first among the elites, and subsequently this practice descended down the social ladder and began to be practised by all groups of the population (on the principle of hierarchical diffusion). The bearer of collective identity at that time was the elite. However, the reasons why the elites accepted inhumation still remain unidentified.

From the 10<sup>th</sup> century onwards, inhumation prevailed across Czech territories (Unger 2002). Starting with the High Middle Ages, the wide variety of local methods of dealing with death began to disappear, rituals became standardised, and the so-called ideal Christian burial was promoted.

The first attempts at reviving the idea of incinerating the deceased appeared in the 16<sup>th</sup> century in the form of attempts seeking a return to the culture of antiquity. In the 18<sup>th</sup> century, there were several cases of incineration burials in England as well as in North America (Pešlová 2007). Around the 1790s, cremation started to be actively promoted thanks to secular French revolutionaries who wanted to create a contrast to the traditional Christian burial. The revolt against Christian values was associated with an increasing secularisation of society (Halas 2006). In 1796 a first draft of a cremation act was filed in Paris. This was a period of social and political change in French society – the Enlightenment. An attempt at a change as well as a change of the burial method itself can be understood as a form of protest against the socio-political orientation of the majority (Štefan 2007). Over time, cremation sympathisers began to unite into small groups, which sought to achieve legalisation of cremation, especially in large influential cities such as the Hague (1874), Washington D.C. (1876), and New York (1882). The groups of individuals promoting cremation at the time were quite active and organised exhibitions, lectures, and conventions (e.g. Milan in 1874). The motives behind the support for cremation were largely of a technical or medical nature, and cremation was, to a significant extent, supported by intellectuals such as physicians, scientists, and engineers (Davies, Mates 2005). Cremation was discussed at meetings of medical professionals (e.g. International Hygiene Congress, Turin, 1880) as a hygienic method of burying the deceased.

Technological progress also played a part in the increase in the number of cremations. In 1876 Friedrich Siemens patented a cremation furnace for which he constructed a burner. The first modern cremation took place in the first modern crematorium in the world in Milan in 1876. Cremation was first legalised in Italy by the Health Act of 1874. This happened in response to the events of 1869 when a public cremation of the body of an Indian maharaja, who died in Florence while on his journey around Europe, took place.

Starting in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the popularity of cremation in the Western world continued to grow. Societies for the promotion of cremation, which were founded in a number of countries, played a significant role in this development. These societies were not only active in promoting cremation, but they also contributed to the building of crematoria. At the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century, there were only a few crematoria in Europe and cremation was not cheap, which made it unaffordable for the majority of Europeans. As the number of European crematoria increased, cremation became more accessible and economical and the cremation rate started to rise.

The two world wars in Europe, in which large numbers of people died and problems occurred with burials of the remains, contributed to the popularity of cremation. Overfilled cemeteries became a problem in cities as a result of increasing urbanisation. Large numbers of people moved to cities, which grew and started to surround cemetery areas that in the past had stood at the edges of cities; this made further expansion of cemeteries (which was desirable due to the increase in the number of urban residents) impossible. The fashionable status of cremation also helped grow its popularity – there was a stronger interest in the Far East, in Buddhism and in travelling in general (Lenderová et al. 2005).

The Catholic Church considered cremation unacceptable, but the Evangelical Church did not have any major objections to it, especially because since the Reformation it regarded burial as a less important ceremony. In 1898 at the Eisenach Conference, representatives of Evangelical churches allowed for the participation of Evangelical priests at cremation funerals (Lenderová et al. 2005). The Roman Catholic Church officially came to accept cremation as a possible method of burial of its members in 1963. In 1969 Pope Paul VI was forced by world public opinion to allow the participation of Roman Catholic priests at funeral acts in crematoria (Pešlová 2007).

The Roman Catholic Church does acknowledge the hygienic advantages of cremation. Cremation burial had been unacceptable to the Church because it considered fire a symbol of hell. Generally, fire is both a negative and a positive symbol. In the past, it was considered a saving element (fire as protection against the darkness and cold, an aid in the preparation of food) but also an element of doom (fire as a destroyer of property and forests) – a friend and an enemy. Table 1 indicates that there were more influences leading to the introduction of cremation and these did not proceed solely from the nature of religion.

However, the reasons determining the choice of burial method by individuals can be completely different from those given in Table 1. Most likely there will be a wide range of reasons, and some will even be irrational (e.g. the fear of waking up in a grave).

Table 1. Influences leading to the introduction of cremation

Arguments for cremation	Basis for each argument
It is a deviation from the model burial of Jesus Christ; simply a different method of burial.	This proceeds from the growing secularisation of society, which has manifested itself for a long period of time, and is associated with a departure from the Church and with an emphasis on man (humanism).
It is a more hygienic method, which at the same time eliminates pollution of the soil and decreases contamination of groundwater.	This proceeds from industrialisation and the development of science and technology, especially technologies facilitating cremation. It is also influenced by the evolution of medicine. The hygiene requirement is also a reaction to the negative experience of wars and epidemics.
It is an effective, simple and fast method of disposal of the human body.	This has its roots in the Enlightenment and realism; in intellectual movements which emphasised rationalism and logic. Cremation is rational and an effective burial method.
It is an exotic, interesting, different way.	This is associated with increasing opportunities for travelling, learning and opening of oneself up to new cultures, inspiration by new cultures (e.g. the Orient).
It is a return to the roots, to the past.	This is associated with a new interest in original beliefs, e.g. paganism, which practised incineration.
It reduces burial costs.	Cremation reduces financial costs related to the coffin, grave site, and tomb. The change in ritual entails a reduction (or elimination) of costs associated with the burial ceremony.
It makes efficient use of cemetery space.	The expansion of globalised cities together with a rising population require an efficient method of using physical space. Cremation allows for a burial using less land and more flexible storage of ashes.
It represents a choice and it is a flexible means for disposing human ashes.	This is associated with democratisation, struggle for human rights and the right to choose – this according to supporters of cremation.

Source: Author's own work.

## Cremation rate versus religion in Europe

Europe's entire burial culture changed during the 20<sup>th</sup> century, i.e., not only the burial method (introduction of cremation), but also all associated phenomena. The cremation rate increased within approximately one hundred years from a value of zero to such an extent that in some countries (Switzerland, Czech Republic, Denmark, Sweden, Great Britain) cremation has become the dominant method of burial – more than 75% of burials are cremation burials. Fig. 1 shows the percentage of cremation burials in Europe today. It is apparent that Europe is highly differentiated in this respect. In Malta and Cyprus, cremation has not been legalised yet, and in



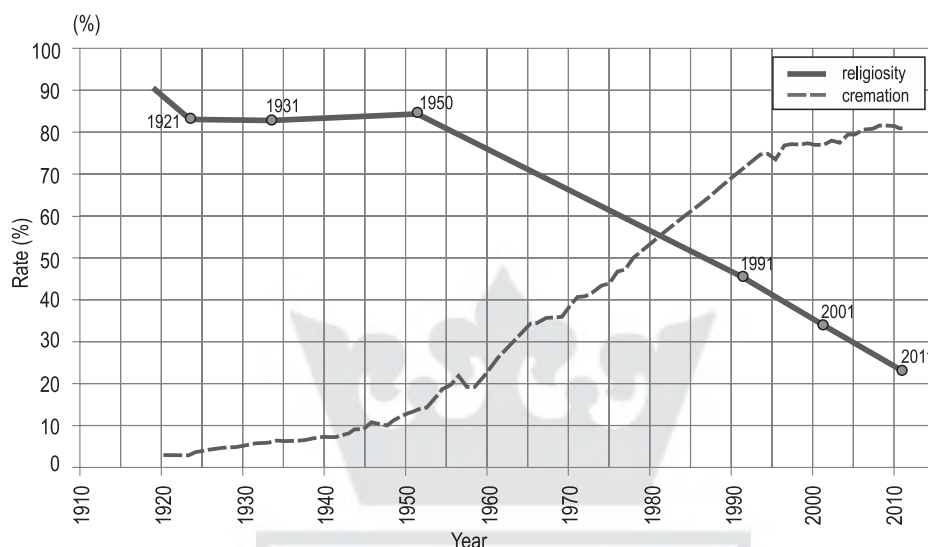


Fig. 1. Cremation rate in European countries in 2010

List of countries shown on the map: Andorra, Austria, Belgium, Bulgaria, Cyprus, Czech Republic, Denmark, Estonia, Finland, France, Germany, Greece, Hungary, Iceland, Ireland, Italy, Latvia, Luxembourg, Malta, Netherlands, Norway, Poland, Portugal, Romania, Russia, Slovakia, Slovenia, Sweden, Switzerland, Great Britain.

Source: Author's own work; Source of data: CANA 2012; CSGB 2013; Davies, Mates 2005; calculation.

Greece, it was legalised only in 2005. In Bulgaria, Romania, Greece, and Poland, the cremation rate is less than 10%. Is this differentiation across Europe caused by differences in religious practices or by other socioeconomic factors?

The figure was produced on the basis of my database of cremation data for countries around the world (Hupková 2013). My cremation database includes cremation rates, details and dates of the legalisation of cremation, construction of crematoria, and the emergence of the cremation movement in European countries and in Australia, Canada, New Zealand and the United States. The *Encyclopaedia of Cremation* (Davies, Mates 2005) is the basic source of data on cremation rates. The publication includes data on the cremation rate in 47 countries around the world from 1876 to 2001. This source, however, is incomplete and many data are missing. I have, therefore, supplemented the database with an international overview of the cremation rate provided by the Cremation Society of Great Britain (CSGB 2013), which also includes data on countries legalising cremation between

1996 and 2010. By combining the two statistics and excluding countries with very limited data, I have produced a relatively comprehensive database of the cremation rate in countries around the world. As the database was incomplete, I searched for missing data individually in national databases, profiles of individual crematoria, and partial national publications on cremation. In cases where I did not have data for 2010, I compared the cremation rate in the given country for the last two decades, and I estimated the 2010 rate based on historical data. The estimate was performed on the basis of experience with the cremation curve for a given country – a log curve (Hupková 2013).

The Pearson correlation coefficient was used for the calculation of the dependence of the cremation rate on the percentage of the faithful of each selected religion (Source of data: (Fischer Weltalmanach 2009) and selected socioeconomic indices (life expectancy at birth, gross national income per capita – PPP in USD, human development index – source of data: HDR 2013). Socioeconomic indices were included because there exists speculation (Hupková 2010a) that cremation is less costly, and it is therefore practised in less developed countries.

The link between the cremation rate and income (GDP) as well as the socioeconomic factor (HDI) manifested itself – but was positive. Cremation is, therefore, practised more frequently in countries characterised by greater economic development. The cremation rate shows a positive significant dependence (0.459 at a significance level of 0.05) on GDP as well as a dependence (0.483 at a significance level of 0.01) on the human development index. A negative dependence of the cremation rate on religiosity was proved as expected ( $-0.57$  at a significance level of 0.01). The higher the percentage of people espousing a certain religion, the lower the cremation rate. However, the percentage of believers is not all that important; it also depends on the type of religion, one which has a strong position in the given country. Generally, cremation shows a negative dependence on Christianity ( $-0.47$  at a significance level of 0.05), because burial in the ground corresponds to the burial of Jesus Christ and the idea of the resurrection of the body. In the Orthodox Church, the cremation principle is contrary to the faith, and the cremation rate therefore shows a negative significant dependence on the percentage of the faithful in the Orthodox Churches ( $-0.488$  at a significance level of 0.01). The strongest dependence of the cremation rate on religiosity was noted for populations with a high percentage of atheists ( $-0.57$  at a significance level of 0.01). Whatever the attitude of a given religion towards cremation, societies with a high percentage of atheists or persons who do not espouse any religious denomination will most probably regard a traditional burial in the ground as a parallel of the burial of Jesus Christ and as an espousal of Christian values.

The analysis herein shows (as expected) a stronger dependence of the burial method on religion than on socioeconomic factors. Religious beliefs shape the way

in which believers regard death and the afterlife, and this attitude is then reflected in the burial practice. The dependence of the burial method on religious belief is, however, not as strong as to be able to explain the full variability of this phenomenon. Therefore, there exist also other factors which are decisive in the choice of burial method.

The overview in Table 2 classifies a number of possible attitudes of religions towards cremation and assigns specific religious schools and movements to distinct types of attitude.

Table 2. Religious attitudes versus cremation

PREFERENCE	PERMISSION	DISCOURAGEMENT	PROHIBITION
Buddhism Hinduism Shinto Jainism Sikhism	Catholicism Protestantism Quakers Jehovah's Witnesses Lutherans Methodism Scientology Christian Science Seventh-Day Adventists Unitarians Ásatrú Neopagan religions	Neo-Confucianism Kemeticism	Islam Zoroastrianism Judaism Mormonism Orthodox Christianity

Source: Author's own work.

In some religions the burial method is not at all important; for example, this is true for the devotees of the Hare Krishna movement for whom dying (as a process) is more important than the method of burial. The body for them is only a container and the soul continues to live after death (Nešporová 2004).

For Christians, death is evil, as it is a consequence of sin; however, it is not an end but a gate to the eternal life (Keene 2003 in Štefková 2008). The deceased is laid to rest in an open coffin and a double ceremony takes place – one in a church or a chapel (absolution) and one at the grave itself (farewell). In its orthodox form, Christianity does not allow cremation. Although cremation was contrary to the Christian religion, it was the Jesuits (a monastic order of the Roman Catholic Church) who were among the first in France in the 1750s to advocate cremation and study its positive characteristics (Richardson 1893).

The Catholic Church supports inhumation as a reflection of the burial of Jesus Christ and accepted cremation as a permissible burial method of its members only in 1963, in the course of the Second Vatican Council, which took place between 1962 and 1965. In 1969 Pope Paul VI was persuaded by worldwide public opinion to permit Roman Catholic priests to participate in funeral acts performed at crematoria. In the Protestant faith, the burial is not as significant; it belongs among the less important rituals, and cremation is actually promoted. At the Eisenach Conference in 1898, representatives of the Evangelical churches allowed the participation of Evangelical priests in the event of cremation (Lenderová, Macková, Bezecný, Jiránek 2005). A correlation analysis showed a positive attitude among Protestants towards cremation (positive dependence of 0.377 at a significance level of 0.05).

The Orthodox Church regards cremation as unacceptable for the following reasons: (a) it is a pagan custom, (b) it is contrary to the doctrine of resurrection, (c) it is not in keeping with the burial of Jesus Christ, (d) the Old and New testaments mention only inhumation, (e) cremation is contrary to the sacred tradition and the canon law (Committee for the Right of Cremation in Greece 2006). Grabbe (2009) states that cremation was introduced by atheists and enemies of the Orthodox Christian Church.

In Judaism, life is regarded as a gift and death is its end. Man was created from dust and after death he must turn into dust again; nevertheless, his further fate depends on the way his burial rituals are performed. The deceased person is buried in the ground without a coffin (in Israel) or in a simple wooden coffin (in the diaspora) (Newman, Siwan 1998 in Štefková 2008). The deceased person waits in the grave for the coming of the Messiah; therefore, the reuse of graves is unthinkable for Jews. The typical appearance of Jewish cemeteries stems from the fact that new graves are built by piling soil on top of old graves (Sígl 2006). Another form of burial – cremation – is allowed in reformed Jewish municipalities; yet, it is forbidden in communities of Orthodox Jews (Kirste, Schultze, Tworuschka 2002 in Štefková 2008).

Muslims believe in the afterlife and they consider their Earthly existence a transient gift from God. Death is not evil; it is not a consequence of sin and it means hope (Keene 2003 in Štefková 2008). An Islamic burial takes place on the same day when a person dies. A burial in the ground is practised and other burial forms are forbidden – this applies also to cremation. The deceased person is shrouded in a piece of cloth and laid in the ground either directly or in a coffin. The cemetery and the grave stones are simple and undecorated. The grave lies in the direction of the sacred building of the Kaaba in Mecca. The grave is considered a temporary space prior to the resurrection and a passage to paradise.

The cremation rate generally exhibits a negative dependence on Western religions (Christianity and Judaism) and a positive dependence on Eastern religions (Hinduism, Buddhism, Chinese religions). Protestantism, which regards cremation as a standard burial method for people (and did so also in the past) defies this pattern.

## Czechia as a “Cremation Superpower?”

Czechia is characterised by a low rate of religiosity; the last census in 2011 showed a decrease in the number of the faithful to 21% (CZSO 2013). It is, however, important to distinguish between: (a) traditional religiosity, (b) small but rapidly growing new churches and (c) alternative spirituality. The International Social Survey Programme shows (Nešporová 2009) that even secular Czechs acknowledge the possibility of life continuing after death, but are a little ashamed of this notion, being aware of its irrationality and its link to religion. Hamplová (2000) adds that the “religiosity rate” is not suitable for expressing the religious beliefs of the population of Czechia, as some believers espouse religion as a historical and cultural tradition, and not because they profess religious teachings. Nešpor also addresses discrepancies in the definition of believers and atheists and states that some people call themselves “non-believers” although they wish only to say that they do not belong to any church (Nešpor 2004). The last Czech census included the option of declaring faith without belonging to any church or denomination; almost half of believers chose this option to describe themselves. Yet, the decline in the number of believers was accompanied by a simultaneous increase in the heterogeneity of religiosity in Czechia – an increase in the significance of smaller religious denominations as well as an increase in the regional heterogeneity of religion, especially in terms of significant differences between cities and the countryside (Havlíček, Hupková, Smržová 2009; Havlíček, Hupková 2010; Hupková 2010b).

Czechia belongs among countries with the highest rate of cremation in the world. Its high rank is significant, especially since it is ranked among Asian countries where cremation has been typical (or common) throughout their entire history. Burial in the ground, which is commonly associated with the burial of Jesus Christ, used to be the typical burial method throughout Czech lands (and in Europe) starting in the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.

Czechia and its predecessor states have a long history of cremation, which was first used when the country was part of the Austro-Hungarian Empire in the 19<sup>th</sup> century. In Czech lands, the movement promoting the legalisation of cremation grew increasingly popular starting in 1899, and in 1917 the first crematorium was completed in the town of Liberec. It is interesting to note that despite the efforts of Czech societies promoting the practice of cremation, the first crematorium was built in Liberec thanks to the work of a branch of the Viennese “Die Flamme” cremation society (Svobodová 2007a). Cremation was legalised in the newly independent state of Czechoslovakia in 1919. German Czechs who were members of the “Die Flamme” society also significantly contributed to the popularity of cremation. The foundation in 1919 of the Czechoslovak Hussite Church, for



which cremation was a common matter and which had and still has columbaria as part of its chapels and churches, was an important turning point in the history of cremation in Czech lands.

It is also worth mentioning that crematoria are not only practical and purpose-built buildings, but they also have an architectural and cultural significance. This is given by the design of crematoria, which are based on three types of buildings: (1) ancient temples, (2) single-nave basilicas, and (3) main sacred buildings (Svobodová 2007a). The architecture of crematoria in all probability alludes to the significance of these places and their meaning at the time of construction. While the crematorium in Liberec, built in 1917 at the instigation of the “Die Flamme” society, was supposed to symbolise the “romantic ideals of the German Reich,” the crematorium in the town of Pardubice, which was built only six years later, may be described as a reference to Slavic roots and symbolises the revolution that helped establish an independent Czechoslovakia following the first world war (Svobodová 2007a, 2007b). The cultural significance of crematorium buildings is also documented by the opinion that the crematorium in Brno ranks among the highest quality buildings of this type in Europe, this most likely from an architectural and functional point of view. The stated aim of the architect Wiesner who designed the crematorium in Brno was to make a building as profane as a crematorium sacred by means of architecture (Svobodová 2007c).

Since 1919 the percentage of cremated individuals in the total number of burials has continued to increase significantly. This trend was also accentuated by a political climate which regarded cremation positively. Cremation suited the postwar socialist ideology, as the below given citation makes clear, and the popularity of cremation was therefore supported by the communist regime in power in Czechoslovakia until 1989. Cremation was regarded as a source of social justice: “Cremation is the same for everyone. The same cremation equipment, the same heat, the same coke or gas [...] and the same amount of it” (Nozar 1931 in Malinová 2002, p. 32). Nevertheless, today it is difficult to find official documents which would show support for cremation by the communist regime. In the same sense, Teather speaks of the situation in Hong Kong (Teather 1999). There is no doubt that communism had a significant influence on the popularity of cremation. It was, however, not the only factor that helped the popularity of cremation in Czechia. The high growth in its cremation rate did not occur in any other communist state in Central and Eastern Europe.

Figure 2 depicts the growth of the cremation rate in Czechia, and at the same time changes in the religiosity rate in order to show how these two phenomena are linked to each other. Unfortunately, data on the religiosity rate are available only for six years – 1910, 1921, 1931, 1950, 1991, 2001 and 2011 (Census of Population, Houses and Flats – CZSO 2007, 2013). The curves in Fig. 2 show that the cremation rate increases with declining religiosity (growing secularisation). The shapes

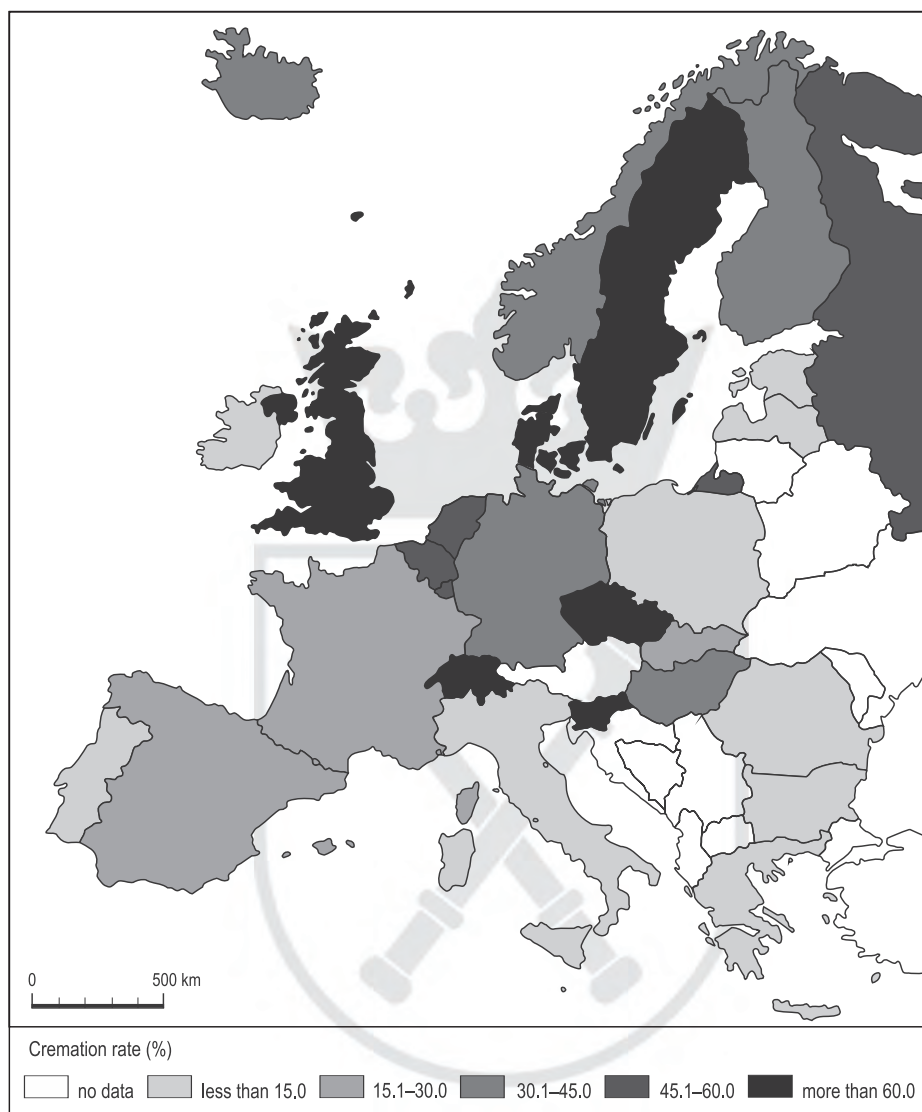


Fig. 2. Cremation and religiosity rates in Czechia in the years 1910–2011

Missing data: the cremation rate for 1983, 1984, 1985 and 1989 – the data were calculated as a linear average of preceding and following values

*Data sources:* Davies, Mates 2005; CZSO 2007, 2013.

of both curves imply that the development of both phenomena in the 20<sup>th</sup> century is analogous, but proceeding in opposite directions.

The graph shows the relationship between the cremation rate and the religiosity rate. Growth in the cremation rate started with the legalisation of cremation and the building of the first crematorium on Czech territory. The cremation rate rose slowly and steadily (an average of 0.3% per year) until the first world war. In the course of World War II, there is a marked growth in the cremation rate given in all probability by the burning of bodies of dead soldiers and Jews. There are, however, no accurate records of cremations for the period of World War II. Therefore, it is necessary to treat the quantitative data as rough estimates. Since the end of World War II, the cremation rate has continued to grow at a faster pace than that before the war (an average of 1.5% per year). This development can be explained by the increase in the availability of crematoria (at the end of World War II there were already thirteen crematoria) and the establishment of new sociopolitical conditions in Czechoslovakia. The new political climate supported the practice of cremation, and at the same time, it opposed religion. The percentage of believers in the Czechoslovak population dropped significantly in 1948 due to government persecution (Daněk, Štěpánek 1992). Since 1993 the cremation rate in Czechia has been growing negligibly or rather stagnating. Annual growth is approximately 0.5%. I presume that in the future, the cremation rate will continue to rise slightly and then it will stop completely. Studies on the long-term evolution of the cremation rate in European countries (Hupková 2013) have shown that the evolution of the cremation rate over time has taken the shape of a log curve. The number of appropriators of cremation growing over time, according to the S-curve, corresponds to the diffusion of innovation theory, and modelling shows that when a country passes through all stages of innovation, diffusion and saturation occur, and the given phenomenon will become fixed at a certain level and will stagnate. I expect that after saturation is reached, the cremation rate will not change significantly, and it will not start to decline, and a change will only take place when a new burial culture emerges with the next evolutionary change. The evolution of the cremation rate in the coming decades will most likely depend on future social development in Czechia – especially on the future development of the role of religion and traditions.

According to Lužný and Navrátilová (2001), the three primary factors which have contributed to the secularising trends in Czech society are: (a) anti-Catholic attitudes of the Czech public from the Hussite period through the national revival and the revolt against the Habsburg Empire to the era of communist atheism, (b) secularising tendencies given by the structural differentiation of modern societies, and (c) atheist propaganda of the communist regime. It is possible to surmise that historical developments have created the right conditions for the currently high cremation rate in Czechia in the same way as they prepared the right conditions for seculari-

sation. The popularity of cremation is certainly connected with the position and role of religion in society, but it is more accurate to regard it as one of the manifestations of general socio-political development and change in Western society in the modern era and only partially as a reflection of the values of modern Czech society.

## Conclusions

In cultural anthropology, the burial ritual is a highly conservative and difficult to change cultural feature (Štefan 2007). The answer to the question about the cause of changes in the burial method is sought in answers to the question of what the cause of cultural change is. According to Štefan, the method of burial has a neutral meaning in itself. It assumes an expressive value only in a certain cultural context.

Which method of burial can be described as being “natural”? Cremation? Inhumation? The answer to the above question is, in my opinion, a simple one. It is that method of burial, which a given culture practises at a given time. Although it could be thought that the original natural burial method in Western civilisation was incineration, which was later “violently” suppressed by inhumation related to Christian tradition, and after 1,000 years it began to be used again, this notion is refuted by the above provided discussion and also by Lutovský (1996 in Malinová 2002) who objects by using the following argument: Due to the thousand-year long practice of inhumation, incineration (which was used till the 9<sup>th</sup> century A.D.) could not have left any trace in the tradition, thinking, and actions of people living today. Neither burial method can be, therefore, considered “natural” or “original”. According to Kroeber (1927), the method of burial is associated with that part of the human behaviour, which is responsible for biological or primary human needs. Such a form of behaviour is not subject to any rules. Kroeber believes that the method of burial possesses the nature of a custom or a fashion in a similar way as clothing or etiquette do.

In the past, two important changes in the method of burial had occurred in Czechia and its predecessor states, and their temporal connection to changes in religious beliefs predetermined a link between the two phenomena. The burial method and phenomena associated with death are dependent on religious belief, which has been confirmed by the correlation analysis and the analysis of changes in the cremation rate in Czechia and its predecessor states in the modern period. Religion is, however, only one of the factors which have an influence on the burial method. I have shown that the practice of cremation is related to key factors such as religion, economic development (GDP, HDI), nature of society (lifestyles, role traditions), and the past and present political context. These principal factors predetermine the fundamental importance of cremation at the regional and national level. If we take

a look at a lower level, the burial method differs across geographic space and time, possesses the character of a custom practised in a certain place and at a certain time, and is linked to other aspects of national or local culture.

I believe that the change in the method of burial in the Early Middle Ages was not directly caused by the advent of Christianity, but that inhumation was given to the Christian civilisation as a christening gift. The second change in the burial method occurred at the end of the 19<sup>th</sup> century and was caused by changes permeating all of society. Religion (growing secularisation) was one such change, but it was not the only change. The key importance of cremation in contemporary Czech society is connected with a reduction in the importance of religion and religious values, but I consider the two phenomena to be the result of general social development in Czechia in the modern and postmodern period.

The marked change in the burial culture in the modern era in the Western world where cremation was not an original method of burial has been caused mainly by internal factors – an evolution of each given society. The change in the burial culture – and the introduction of cremation – cannot be therefore considered changes implanted into society (e.g. by cremation societies or other ideologies). Cremation societies played an important part in the process of society accepting cremation (legalisation of cremation and construction of crematoria), but the development of cremation as a new burial method was caused by a change in thinking, values and attitudes in Western society, which include the process of secularisation, an emerging interest in alternative spirituality, a return to nature and its protection, emergence of various subcultures and groups with a specific approach to burial, as well as other developments. The expansion of the change in the burial culture took place by means of a hierarchical diffusion from key centres of civilisation where the cultural, political, and technological progress of that time was concentrated (Hupková 2013).

In the context of burial culture as a whole, cremation can be considered not as a final act (choice) of the disposal of the deceased person's body, but as a means (an option) in the performance of additional rituals – the free disposal of human ashes (Prendergast, Hockey, Kellaher 2006).

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